Love's Endless Incarnating

An Advent Beholding

I betroth you to myself forever…
…betroth you in tenderness and love…

…and you will come to know the One Who Is.[1]

Hosea 2:19-20

Kerrie Hide



[2]

Lady Pain has been my constant companion over the past few months, inviting me to awaken to a deeper sense of divine love becoming one with me — and with all of us — in suffering. And with so much heartache in our world and so many of us in our *Contemplative Evolution Network* vulnerable at present, as the beautiful season of Advent approaches, I ponder anew the wonder and mystery of the incarnation — of how in the Word becoming flesh, love is endlessly incarnating in vulnerable creation. I am drawn to an extraordinary portrait of mystical betrothal between Gertrude of Helfta and her Beloved as she offers "a little prayer," an *oratiuncula*, of all the suffering that has weighed her down in body and spirit and all the pleasure of which she was deprived. (*Herald of Divine Love*, *Legatus Divinae Pietatis* III.2.1)[3] I am invited to behold.

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[1] My translation.
[2] Christ as Salvator Mundi (Savior of the World) *Book of Hours of Carmelite Use,* attributed to the *Master of the Dresden Prayer Book*, created in Bruges around 1480. State Library of New South Wales.
[3] All translations are my own from *Gertrude d'Helfta, Oeuvres Spirituelles*, 5 Books. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1968.

Hence, in this Advent beholding, we will linger with Gertrude and see how in this intimate exchange of love, she comes to a new understanding of how her suffering is transformed within her relational intimacy with Christ. We will see how she offers us a much-needed beholding of love's endless incarnating that meets us in our fleshy, embodied, lived experience and awakens us to an ever-deepening understanding of the meaning of incarnation. In an environment where incarnation is so often understood primarily as a response to sin, Gertrude opens our eyes to its deeper mystery as the fulfilment of God's desire for loving union with us. Gertrude offers us fresh sapiential insight into how the in-carnation, the Word becoming flesh, is a divine-human love affair.

Reading Gertrude

Before we enter into the lavish intimacy of Gertrude's encounter with Christ, we will fine-tune how she invites us to enter into her writings to experience what she experiences. In book two of the *Legatus,* written in Gertrude's own voice (L II.24.1), Gertrude draws us into the ever-intensifying dynamism that flows from her words on the page into contemplation. She describes how, when we read from within the sweetness of the Beloved's loving kindness, open to his drawing us into our inmost being (*Et inde tracti in intimis suis ampliora experiantur*…) we undergo an expansion, an amplification, an intensification within our inmost heart. Gertrude describes how her words are "like vivid painted pictures" (*velut depictas*) that awaken our imagination (*imaginationes*) and draw us (*ducantur*) "to taste hidden manna within" (*Ad gustandum intra se manna illud absconditum*). This very Eucharistic hidden manna has "no trace or admixture of bodily imagery" (*Quod nulla corporearum imaginationum admixtione valet partiri*.)

There is a beautiful organic movement from the painted images (*depictas*) that awaken our inner eye, to the awakening of the spiritual sense of *gustandum*, tasting the hidden manna within, which has *nulla*, no bodily imagery. An ever-deepening oneing heart awareness awakens as painted pictures open into the embodied sensuality of spiritually tasting, into the apophatic intimacy of contemplation as we "taste the hidden manna". Gerturde invites us into an intimate, experiential participation in divine love that leaves "anyone who tastes this still hungering" (*Sed solus qui edit adhuc esurit*). There is a sense of endless desire drawing us into love's infinite fullness, unveiling and revealing our natural face, transforming us from radiance to radiance (*claritate in claritatem*) (see 2 Cor 3:18) within our lived bodily reality. Gerturde's words draw us into the betrothal and mystical marriage of contemplation, and illuminate, clarify, and uncover our natural face, that inherently reflects the Beloved we behold in our bodily reality now.

Gertrude's Little Prayer

The scene from Book Three (*Legatus* III.2.1) begins with Gertrude offering a little prayer, an *oratiuncula*, to her Beloved. An *oratiuncula,* the diminutive of *oratio,* is a tiny, humble, intimate prayer holding all the tenderness suggested by the diminutive. It is a tiny icon of the incarnation, a luminous beholding that opens into the natural movement of contemplation that Gertrude describes. The sisters who record this account vividly portray Gertude offering to her Beloved, all the suffering that has weighed her down in body and spirit and the deprivation of pleasure that has made her feel alone. They saturate our senses with vivid colours and intense feelings as they tell us that "The Lord appeared" (*apparuit*) to Gertrude. While at first we may think this is a corporeal or imaginative vision,[4] the rich

[4] Augustine's *Genesi ad litteram*, Book XII, distinguishes corporeal vision (*visio corporalis*) — seeing through the bodily senses, as we see a physical object. Spiritual or imaginative vision (*visio spiritualis*) — perceiving images inwardly, without their necessarily being present to the physical eyes. Intellectual vision (*visio intellectualis*) — apprehending intelligible or divine realities without the mediation of images. Gertrude evokes all these visionary ways of knowing and takes us beyond vision.

visions of the *Legatus* draw us beyond any categorizing that creates divisions between body, imagination and intellect. *Apparuit,* to be made visible, describes how something that is already true, but hidden, is now being revealed to Gertrude. We are invited to enter into the scene, behold, and yield into the salvific process of being Christ's betrothed.

As the scene unfolds, there is a lovely interweaving of evocative "painted pictures" and vivid "imagination", as we enter into an embodied encounter between Gertrude and Christ. Surprisingly, Christ wears the two offerings Gertrude has made him—her suffering and the pleasures denied her—in the form of exquisite jewelled rings (*gemmatorum annulorum)* worn on his hands. Though the rings aren't described, we can see their beauty, as they reveal the astonishing tenderness of divine betrothal, of love already given, of suffering embraced in mutual intimacy and the mystery of incarnation continuously unfolding in Gertrude, and our own lives. Gertrude then "understands" (*intellexisset*). This is no mere intellectual recognition, but a beholding in which the mind of Gertrude's heart awakens to what love is revealing in a new and more unitive way. She comes to "know" from within her intimacy with Christ, the divine-human oneing already present in her embodied life.

I invite you to behold the beauty of Christ's hands
adorned with the rings of your suffering.
Feel the intimacy, and open into love's way of knowing.

Subsequently, Gertrude perceives inwardly (*praesensit*) Christ gently anointing (*linire*) her left eye with the ring on his left hand, the ring of her bodily suffering. *Linire* suggests the tenderness of Christ's touch, a gentle anointing of her eye. The pathos then heightens, for we see that the very same eye (*eundem oculum*) that Christ appears to touch *in spiritu* subsequently aches *in corpore*, never fully recovering its former health. Gertrude's suffering, offered to Christ and worn by him as a precious ring, returns to her through the tenderness of his touch, and she feels this touch as enduring pain. This is not to suggest that the touch of Christ necessarily brings pain, but rather that the intimacy of Christ's and Gertrude's union is so intensely one in love that her own suffering opens into Christ's loving participation in the suffering of the world. His touch is felt in her flesh, and she is opened into the communal heart of suffering. The boundary between spiritual encounter and embodied experience becomes permeable. Might her aching eye become a new way of seeing, an awakening to the suffering of creation through her intimate participation in Christ? A new beholding is born in their shared life.

The meaning of incarnation infuses the dramatic gestures as there is a sense that suffering is not an end in itself, nor is it necessary for divine-human betrothal. Suffering, which is part of the human condition, is taken into Christ and becomes a wedding ring, as the pain shared and held in tenderness becomes jewels for the ring. Gertrude then recites from the office of St Agnes, and the ring becomes a song of love: "My Lord Jesus Christ has betrothed me to himself with this ring." (*Annulo suo subarrhavit me Dominus meus Jesus Christus*.) S*ubarrhavit* evokes the binding pledge of betrothal, a love given in promise. We are fully, completely the spouse of Christ endlessly, adorned with a beauty that surpasses gold and is incomparably precious.

There is a delightful movement from Gertrude's little prayer to the picture of Christ's ringed hands, to the tenderness of his touch and the awakening of a new seeing through their oneing in love. In this intimacy, Gertrude's suffering opens into the suffering of the world, held within the one body of Christ. Through this relational intimacy, Gertrude awakens to her eternal betrothal, and ours, with the Word made flesh, and to the transforming, embodied unity already unfolding within us.

Endless Betrothal Unveiling

Throughout the biblical tradition, from Hosea and the Song of Songs to Isaiah and the Gospels, the divine-human encounter is envisaged as a great love affair. There is an especially poignant expression

of this divine-human love affair in Augustine's *Tractates on the Gospel of John*. Reflecting on the wedding at Cana, Augustine asks why Christ should come to a wedding when he has already come into the world for a wedding. Then, in a startling affirmation, he declares: *Verbum enim sponsus, et sponsa caro humana* — "The Word is the bridegroom, and human flesh the bride" (*Tractate* VIII.4).



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Human flesh is the bride! In this extraordinary vision of incarnation, Augustine beholds the womb of Mary as the bridal chamber (*thalamus*) where the Word unites himself to human flesh. The incarnation is already a marriage, a divine-human oneing in which our vulnerable, embodied humanity is embraced in the intimacy of divine love.

How beautifully Augustine illuminates Gertrude's encounter. What Augustine beholds in Mary's womb, Gertrude discovers within her own vulnerable flesh. The jewelled rings are not simply rewards for suffering, but signs of a love already given, a betrothal already begun in the Word's embrace of human flesh. Her suffering is neither the "price" nor the "condition" of divine intimacy, but becomes, through Christ's tenderness, a place of awakening to their shared life. In the tenderness of Christ's touch, Gertrude awakens to the mystery that the incarnation is not simply something that happened long ago in Mary's womb. The love that became flesh continues to awaken within our own embodied existence, drawing us ever more deeply into the divine-human communion.

And critically, Augustine's *caro humana* embraces more than any individual body. It is our shared humanity, vulnerable and beloved, that the Word takes into divine intimacy. Gertrude's rings thus open our beholding beyond her suffering, to the wounded flesh of our world, already held within the immeasurable tenderness of divine love. The Word who became flesh continues to disclose within our flesh the mystery of love's endless incarnating.

When Love Becomes Our Seeing

When Lady Pain overwhelms us, when the heartbreak of our world threatens to obscure our belonging in love, Gertrude invites us to behold anew. Her jewelled rings reveal a mystery more intimate than suffering itself: the Word has become flesh, and our vulnerable humanity is already embraced in the endless tenderness of divine love. What Augustine beholds in Mary's womb, Gertrude discovers in her

[5] Rogier van der Weyden and workshop, *The Annunciation*, c. 1435–1440. Oil on oak panel. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Public-domain reproduction via Wikimedia Commons. Mary receives the Word within an intimate bedchamber, evoking Augustine's vision of the incarnation: *Verbum enim sponsus, et sponsa caro humana* — "The Word is the bridegroom, and human flesh the bride" (*Tractates on John* VIII.4).

own suffering flesh, and we are invited to participate in the same intimacy. The bridal chamber embraces all. Love is endlessly incarnating, awakening us to the divine-human oneing in which we live.

This Advent, as we enter the stillness of contemplation, may we awaken to seeing with the eyes of the Beloved, holding one another and our suffering world within love's eternal embrace.



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[6] Marriage of Saint Agnes, by the Master of the Bartholomausaltars, Koln, c. 1495, paining on oak - Germanisches Nationalmuseum - Nuremberg, Germany. Public-domain reproduction via Wikimedia Commons.